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REPRESENTATION OF POVERTY IN SOUTH KOREA: A CASE STUDY OF **BONG JOON-HO'S PARASITE**

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ABSTRACT

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South Korea's transformation into a modern industrial nation and leading global economic power is a remarkable example. Even though the economy is developing rapidly, pockets of poverty still exist, so a practical alleviation approach is needed. This journal article examines South Korea's economic growth from 2019 to 2024, showing its extraordinary transformation from crisis to one of the most influential global economic forces. Additionally, this analysis includes perspectives from Bong Joon-ho's film "Parasite," which visually shows the social and economic disparities in South Korea, encouraging thoughts about capitalism, poverty, and social class. Methodologically, this research examines well-known national and international journals focusing on how the "Parasite" conception influences the South Korean economy in overcoming poverty. This film depicts social differences through scenes, settings, and dialogue. Various perspectives are used in this discussion, including global development economics and neoclassical growth theory. The recommendations emphasize that vocational skills development, equitable access to education and health services, and sustainable policy implementation in collaboration with the private sector are all important. Ultimately, this article reveals the message of the film Parasite, which illustrates how difficult it is to deal with poverty in South Korea. It also suggests a broad strategy that combines global development economics with local policies tailored to people's needs.

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1. INTRODUCTION

As time passes, films have become a medium that is no longer foreign to humans (Zain et al., 2021). Talking about film texts as message markers, each scene is interpreted by the actors. An interesting storyline and good sound effects keep the audience from getting bored, and they don't need to use their imagination like they would when reading a book. Films are not just a medium of entertainment; they can also be used for information, education, and communication (Zain et al., 2021). According to Nurhidayah (2017) every sign in this film has many meanings, not just one. Not only can each sign produce one meaning, but signs can also produce a broader sense in terms of words.





Every sign in the subtitle has a meaning, and every phenomenon is present in the storyline of every scene. Every scene in the film displays a message conveyed to the audience. Each incident that forms the film's storyline allows the audience to analyze and understand its meaning in their way. Film is a communication medium that can indirectly influence the thoughts and actions of its viewers (Weaving et al., 2018).

South Korea is one of the countries that has succeeded in transforming itself into a modern industrial country and an economic power that is highly respected in the world. In addition, this country is an example of the most extraordinary economic development in the world. In less than thirty years, this country became a developed country in industry and trade. However, poverty still exists at a crossroads that needs to be addressed. Korea has had the fastest-growing economy in the world since its inception in 1962. South Korea's economic history and development from 2019-2024 includes a remarkable economic transformation from crisis to becoming one of the most important global financial powers. In 2019, South Korea became a leading manufacturer in various industries, and South Korean brands became famous worldwide. In less than 30 years, this country has also become a developed industrial and trading country (Syamsyul, 2020).

South Korea's economy was built by building industries that met developing country standards, such as textiles and light shoes. This shows that this complicated country does not want half-measures. All the needs have been prepared for the next industrial level, including infrastructure, human resources, and knowledge. The government fully supports the business world in implementing this plan. By providing infrastructure, cheap capital, low taxation, and high-quality human resources. Efficiency and quality management at the bureaucratic level, where bureaucrats are educated through high-quality educational methods and discipline. Reducing inefficiencies can produce high-quality policies without forgetting bureaucratic regulations.

Welfare policies since the beginning of state-led industrialization and advances in electoral democracy since the transition to democracy have hampered the implementation of welfare programs. According to this report, amid a lack of capacity to set an agenda and implement a welfare bureaucracy, the exponential politicization of welfare issues has led to a political preference for less profitable and universally applicable solutions without increases in taxes or fees, as occurred in 2017 (Kim, 2023). Countries worldwide make policy decisions to implement substantial measures targeted at the poorest groups most affected.

Economic insecurity usually focuses on changes in income and the transition from income poverty, but a family's financial condition is influenced by more than just income. The level of wealth, assets, and changes that occur over time also influence. The experience of asset poverty in the previous year significantly increases the likelihood of asset poverty by 5-12 percent. Additionally, homeownership, disposable income, and diversification of household portfolios increase the possibility of asset poverty (Weon & Rothwell, 2020). There are several causes of poverty in South Korea, especially in the economy; one is the limitation of workers' capacity to get out of income poverty because they cannot work longer and invest in household production or human capital. As a result, workers' lack of time deepens their vulnerability (Kim & Lee, 2023).

So, in the film Parasite, made by Bong Joon-ho, there is a hidden background where the poor get poorer, and the rich get more prosperous due to the intersection of poverty and the existence of capitalism, where specific individuals or groups in the country own power. This film depicts how the government can resolve poverty in the country by visualizing it through this film. This film tells the story of two families, Kim and Park, who differ in wealth and poverty. The poor Kim family lives in a cramped house with no wealth, while the rich Park family lives in a large house with various wealth (Angela & Winduwati, 2020).

Previous research conducted by Maharani & Saidi (2021a) examined the visual representation of hedonism in the 2019 film Parasite from various points of view. Kim Ki-taek's family tries not to show their identity as a middle-class family, which is the initial form of hedonism demonstrated by the workers at Park Dong-ik's house. The depiction of the hedonism of a lowincome family in social reality is what attracts attention for further research in the film Parasite.

Kim Ki-taek's family tried to become workers in Park Dong-ik's house, but it was done incorrectly because there were lies about Kim Ki-taek's family background (Maharani & Saidi, 2021b).

Previous research by Farahbakhsh and Ebrahimi (2021) explores how the film "Parasite" conveys the implicit message of social inequality, using metaphors to highlight class divisions in South Korea. The film depicts a low-income family living in a semi-basement apartment, emphasizing the harsh realities of social class stratification in a capitalist society. The Marxist perspective, as reflected in the film, focuses on the proletariat's exploitation by the bourgeoisie, revealing the consequences of such systemic inequality. The film portrays the struggle for social mobility and the ongoing conflict between classes, ultimately critiquing the capitalist framework that perpetuates these disparities.

This research will reveal and explain more about capitalists from various points of view. It will do so using a global development economics approach. It illustrates how social and economic class differences can affect a person's life through a story about two families with very different backgrounds. Kim and Parks each use various ways to deal with their financial problems. Kim, who comes from a lower class, achieves success through unethical means, while Parks, who comes from the upper class, uses his wealth and social network to maintain his status. This film shows how capitalism can influence human behavior and how class differences can affect individual lives.

This film shows the poverty that exists in South Korea by depicting the scenes, settings, and dialogue. In this film, poverty still exists in South Korea, and there are still visible social disparities, which makes them considered trivial and treated differently by people who have power and wealth. In Korea, people think it's essential to have a lovely house and car; perhaps that's why it depicts a portrait of poverty that defines who they are. The film also shows the smell as a symbol of poverty that defines who they are. Even though their basic needs are met, their economic comparison makes them relatively poor (Angela & Winduwati, 2020).

So, the research questions in this research are: 1) How does the film "Parasite" depict South Korea's socio-economic fault lines, and how do these fault lines affect poverty?; 2) How is South Korea's economic growth affected by the intersection of socio-economic elements depicted in the film "Parasite"?; 3) How does the film "Parasite" reflect the socio-economic situation of South Korea, and how does it reflect the problem of poverty in the country?; and 4) How has the film "Parasite" influenced public policy and efforts to reduce poverty and socio-economic inequality in South Korea?

2. RESEARCH METHODS

This research used qualitative methods by collecting film data on scenes depicting social and economic situations. Take an angel scene in the film with an analysis of scenes, settings, and dialogue depicting South Korea's poverty and analyze this with a global economic approach through economic growth. Economic growth increases income, creates new jobs, and allows people to escape poverty (Ginting & Rasbin, 2010). One of the main components of global economic growth uses neoclassical growth theory, which is the Sollow neoclassical growth model. In this analysis, separate from capital and labor inputs, Sollow's growth model relies on the idea that returns to scale are continually decreasing. Technological progress is considered an additional component allowing long-term economic growth. External factors seem to cause Sollow's high and low growth or are not influenced by other factors (Ginting & Rasbin, 2010).

This research aims to examine various scientific articles that discuss the film Parasite, which influences the economy in South Korea to overcome poverty. These articles have been published in reputable national and international journals. Apart from that, the review article in this study is directed at conceptualizing the study of the film Parasite, which influences the economy in South Korea to overcome poverty. These questions are explained based on the study topic, framework, and previous research findings indexed in Scopus and Google Scholar data. Articles reviewed in this research went through the stages of 1) searching for articles that match the discussion theme and 2) topic mapping.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Introduction to South Korean Culture and Social Issues

The result South Korea, known as the Republic of Korea, is in the southern part of the Korean Peninsula. The country has more than 50 million inhabitants, and its capital is Seoul, the cultural, political and economic center of South Korea, which is well known worldwide. Korean culture, known as K-pop (Korean pop music), K-dramas (Korean television dramas), and worldwide successful Korean films, are some examples of South Korean popular culture. Additionally, South Korea has a rich cultural history, which includes traditional food, art, and architecture.

One of the successful Korean films, "Parasite", designed by Bong Joon-ho, talks about scenes, settings, and dialogue showing social inequality and economic and social fault lines in South Korea. These scenes show social inequalities, such as educational disparities, living environments, and opportunities. In the film, the Kim family lives in poverty and deprivation while trying to make ends meet, and the Park family's daughter taunts that the smell will remain until the Kim family leaves their place. The social inequality depicted in the film is a consequence of the country's capitalist economic system.

Analyzing Scenes, Settings, and Dialogues that Depict Poverty in South Korea



Figure 1. Depicts the Kim Family Home Source: Bong Joon-ho. (2019). Parasite. CJ Entertainment.

In Figure 1, there is a picture of a small basement house in a small alley owned by the poor Kim family. Kim Ki-taek's family lives in a Banjiha, a semi-underground house in South Korea, depicted in dark contrast. This environment reflects the life of South Korea's proletarian class society, which is hidden behind splendor and stability. We can see from the visual film of the house, which shows the poverty and financial problems they experience, that social inequalities are very contradictory. In addition, they also have difficulty using mobile phones at home and are described as poor. South Korea is famous for its technological advances, such as Wi-Fi with the world's first 5G network. Despite modern technology, many people are unable to enjoy internet speed.



Figure 2. Depicts the Park Family Home Source: Bong Joon-ho. (2019). Parasite. CJ Entertainment.

In the Figure 2, the house is in an elite neighborhood and a luxurious setting. The image is enough to attract the attention of the audience. The camera frame becomes much broader when entering Park Dong-Ik's family home, decorated with bright contrasts and almost no dust. The cellar used to store wine was the only "strange" room in the house, but it was later discovered that other pests lived there. This contrasts with low-income families who live semi-underground, called Baniiha.

We can see the living conditions between the two. In this film, the two houses represent social inequality with different characters. The Kim family is unemployed and tries to find work until they work at the Park's family house. The Park family belongs to the elite group of South Korean society. Conflict arises when Chung-Sook discovers that Moon-Gwang's old housekeeper hides her husband, Oh Geun-Se. Geun-Se lived in the Park's family bunker for over four years to avoid loan sharks.



Figure 3. Illustrating the Difficulty of Finding Work Source: Bong Joon-ho. (2019). Parasite. CJ Entertainment.

The picture at minute 1.06 seconds to minute 1.30 seconds describes that what they did was falsifying someone else's diploma for a man named Ki Wo in applying for a job as a private teacher at one of the rich people's homes in South Korea, namely the Park family's house. The meaning of this picture means that in South Korea, there are still many people who have difficulty finding work because there is a capitalist system controlled by the private sector (rich people) who sort jobs according to graduates from the best campuses in South Korea so that people who are not at the best campuses have difficulty looking for work to meet their basic daily needs until they become poor people in South Korea. Finally, with Ki Wo's tactics, he submitted the document and convinced the Park family, a wealthy family, to hire him as an English teacher.

Apart from that, from minute 19:51 to minute 20:45, Ki-woo cunningly recommends his sister, Ki-jung, as an art therapist for the Park's family son. He forges her credentials, just as he did with his own, to secure her a job. Soon after, Ki-woo devises a plan to remove the Park family's driver and housekeeper so that his parents can take their places, ensuring higher income and greater comfort for the entire Kim family. The film escalates to a tense confrontation at a birthday party for the Park's family son, where the truth about the Kim family's deception unravels. The story culminates in a horrific and brutal act of violence, illustrating the destructive consequences of class struggle and social ambition in a capitalist society (Farahbakhsh & Ebrahimi, 2021).

The film "Parasite" also shows how South Korean teenagers become pessimistic because of the highly competitive job market and education system, as well as disappointment with their economic future so that they resort to selfishness and greed by lying to be accepted for a job that has a satisfactory salary for them. As director Bong Joon-ho said, South Korea's economic problems are a matter of emotions and numbers. This film shows how South Korean people live in Banjiha, slums, and cramped living quarters and how they struggle to meet their basic needs (Wirayudha, 2020). Absolute poverty occurs when a person does not have sufficient income to meet their basic needs, such as clothing, food, school, and medical treatment.

Living Conditions of people in South Korea

South Korea is a country in East Asia whose capital is Seoul (Darini, 2010). The country has a long and complicated history and a very diverse culture, which impacts the daily lives of its residents. Until now, the situation of South Korean society has continued to change in various aspects, such as culture, education, and even the economy. However, the population crisis and high suicide rate are complex social problems facing South Korea. South Korea's suicide rate is twice as high as the OECD average, and economic and social pressures are thought to be the cause (Anisa, 2022). In addition, regarding economic disparities, South Korea maintains a balanced financial structure with a relatively high per capita income. According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), South Korea's GDP per capita was approximately \$37,670 in 2022 (International Monetary Fund, 2022). However, income inequality persists; as of 2023, the Gini coefficient—a measure of income inequality—stood at 0.32, indicating a moderate level of income disparity (Yoon, 2025). These figures highlight that, despite overall economic growth, significant income gaps remain between different social classes in South Korea.

Data Analysis of Unemployment Rates and Wages in South Korea for 2018-2024

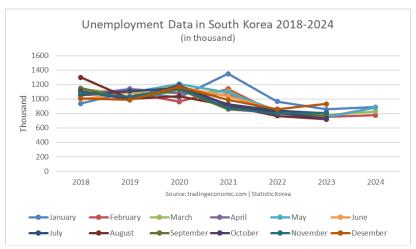


Figure 4. Unemployment Data in South Korea for 2018-2024 Source: Processed Data (2025)

Figure 4 explains that from 2018-2024, data sourced from trading economics saw a decrease of around 526 thousand unemployed people in South Korea (Trading Economics, 2024b). This data has experienced a drastic decline, from the highest in January 2021, with around 1,350,000 people, or around 5.4 percent, experiencing unemployment, to the lowest in August 2023, with around 720 thousand people or around 2.4 percent experiencing unemployment (Trading Economics, 2024b). From this data, the South Korean government continues implementing policies to reduce poverty through various means such as training, job vacancies, etc. In 2024, unemployment decreased by around 774 thousand people, or around 2.6 percent, who became unemployed; in the previous month, in January 2024, around 889 thousand people, or around 3 percent, experienced this. The government has continuously tried to reduce social disparities in economic terms from the average population in South Korea from 2018-2024 of around 51 million people (World Bank, 2024).

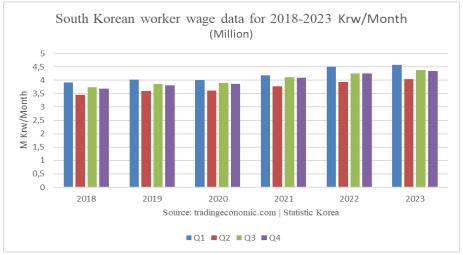


Figure 5. Data on Workers' Wages in South Korea for 2018-2023 Source: Processed Data (2025)

Figure 5 explains the growth rate of workers' wages in South Korea, sourced from Trading Economics, which saw an increase in the average minimum wage for workers from 2018 of around 3.46M Krw/Month to 4.34M Krw/Month. In 2019, there was a decrease at the beginning of the year of around 4.02M Krw/Month from the previous year, 2018, and in 2020, the average wage for workers in South Korea was around 3.885M Krw/Month. In 2021, the highest was in Q1 or at the beginning of the year, around 4.19M Krw/Month, and the lowest was in Q2, around 3.77M Krw/Month. In 2022, the highest in Q1 is around 4.51M Krw/Month, the weakest in Q2 is around 3.93M Krw/Month, and the average for that year is around 4.255M Krw/Month. In 2023, the highest share will be in O1, around 4.58M Krw/Month. Meanwhile, In the middle of O3, around 4.37M Krw/Month, and the lowest in Q2, around 4.04M Krw/Month. However, in Q4, it will increase from Q2 to around 4.34M Krw/Month. In this case, the South Korean government has continuously made policy efforts to improve the welfare of its people (Trading Economics, 2024a).

Efforts to Eradicate Poverty

Poverty is a severe problem that must be resolved in South Korea. Social inequality, lack of access to education and health services, and economic limitations experienced by some groups can cause community poverty. Higher education levels and higher incomes are two main causes of existing disparities. These results suggest that to overcome income and education-related barriers associated with obesity among Korean adults, multifaceted, comprehensive interventions at local and national levels are needed (Hwang et al., 2019).

In the past ten years, the Korean government has created policies and laws supporting SSE, which has allowed many SSE organizations and companies to emerge quickly in the country. Although many people agree that South Korea's SEOE can achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), it is still unclear how well it will perform in real life (Lee, 2019). Social and solidarity economics (SSE) has attracted the attention of policymakers and practitioners worldwide in recent years because of its potential to address today's major problems, such as unemployment, poverty, inequality, social exclusion, and climate change. SSE is an integrated, community-centred, and environmentally sensitive approach that aims to create value for local people and communities (Lee, 2019).

The government should increase vocational skills development to reduce unemployment and improve the quality of re-employable jobs by expanding tailored programs for young and elderly workers (Kang et al., 2022). Double poverty refers to the double poverty that vulnerable workers experience due to lack of time and income. South Korea, where labor market characteristics continue to increase the risk of multiple poverty.

In defining the poverty line as less than two-thirds of median income and leisure. It looks at how occupational class, job type, company size, social wage, union membership, and gender influence multiple poverty. Women workers, low-skilled service workers, and non-regular workers are doubly impacted by poverty. By analyzing two aspects of poverty, namely time and income, because they cannot work longer hours or invest in household production or human capital, time poverty limits workers' ability to escape income poverty. As a result, lack of time makes workers more stressed (Kim & Lee, 2023). The following obligation of the South Korean government is to overcome poverty by implementing effective and sustainable policies that focus on sustainable and inclusive development, which means increasing access to education, health, and economic opportunities for people who are vulnerable to poverty, as well as ensuring that the policies made can have a positive impact on communities in need, South Korea faces many challenges.

The Implied Message in the 2019 Film Parasite in International Relations

The film "Parasite" clearly depicts the social differences between wealthy and low-income families in South Korea. Class conflict that occurs in South Korean society. The proletariat is moving to change their fate due to the continuing social class gap. Here, the Kim family is depicted as proletarians trying to change their fate incorrectly. In contrast, the Park family is shown as a bourgeoisie who has the money and material resources to employ the proletariat and rule the Kim family with that money. The fraud carried out by the Kim family also shows the wild side of the proletariat, which will do anything to rise from poverty (Kemalasari et al., 2021). The existence of capitalism in South Korea allows rich people to exploit poor workers. The main emphasis is on the injustices and challenges that weaker groups face. This shows that poverty is a problem that must be handled seriously. This film also shows how difficult it is for low-income families to get work, education, and health care and that reducing poverty requires fair and equitable access for everyone.

4. CONCLUSION

South Korea has experienced extraordinary economic development recently, but poverty persists. The film "Parasite" by Bong Joon-ho depicts the social and economic disparities in South Korea, where poor people live in Banjiha or semi-underground houses, and rich people live in elite houses with enormous power. This film shows the differences in living environment, education, and opportunities between wealthy and low-income families. This film also shows the efforts of a lowincome family to change their fate in the wrong direction. However, this film also provides an implied message about the injustice that exists in the capitalist system, which allows rich people to exploit poor workers.

To overcome poverty, the South Korean government needs to increase access to education and health services and expand vocational skills development programs to reduce unemployment. The government must also implement effective and sustainable policies and work with the private sector to reduce social inequality.

In addition, the global development economic approach, especially economic growth, can help reduce poverty by increasing income, creating new jobs, and providing opportunities for people to escape poverty. However, this approach must also be combined with appropriate local policies and collaboration with truly trusted private parties without taking overall control of improving people's welfare and improving South Korea's economic development, especially workers.

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